PECULIAR VICTORY

September 29, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 52:13-15
Mark 9:30-37

"...whoever wants to be first must be the last of all and servant of all."
-Mark 9:35 (NRSV)

"What a pity," author Annie Dillard says, "that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians. There is no breather. The disciples turn into the early Christians between one rushed verse and another. What a dismaying pity, that here come the Christians already." [Incarnation, Contemporary Writers On The New Testament, Ed. Alfred Corn, p. 36]

They were silent, Mark reports, those disciples-of-Jesus-become-early-Christians, and in the becoming looking so familiar, so very much like you and me. They were uncharacteristically silent because they were embarrassed by their utter lack of tact, sensitivity and appropriateness. They had shamed themselves and they had nothing to say. And, I think, they were stunned into silence by the raw challenge of what he said to them. It is not often that religion rises out of the pastel, genteel garden the world assigns it and strikes our senses with full passionate bloom. But it did this day and they were absolutely silent, as we should have been too.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? is the defining question for Mark. And for one-half of his small book he answers that in terms of teaching and healing and walking behind Jesus as he travels between the small villages of Galilee. And then one day he asks, "Who do you think I am?" When Peter answers "the Messiah," Jesus explains for the first time that being the Messiah is a very different matter from what they had been taught to expect. It would mean reorienting life, giving life away, pouring life out, suffering, dying. Following him to Jerusalem was the equivalent of picking up a cross and carrying it.

He continues with the thought walking along the road in Galilee: following means denial of self, sacrifice, suffering.

That evening, in the common house in Capernaium they used as home and headquarters, he asked: "What were you arguing about this afternoon?" It had been a petty thing at first, a small disagreement, the exact nature of which they had forgotten. But it had escalated, egos got involved, and an inconsequential disagreement, and became combat: Suddenly the real issue emerges over the primal matter of who had the power and authority, who was right and who was wrong, who would be number one. When his question focused on what had happened they were too embarrassed to respond. Here he was, patiently trying to bring them along, talking about giving his life away, and they're arguing over who is number one.

Annie Dillard is dismayed. "What a pity that on the heels of Christ come the Christians. Who could believe in them?"

It is an important moment. He sits down - which is always the signal that official teaching is about to happen - and says something so stunning they remained in silence.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last and the servant of all."

Their families must have been there too. ...children playing, toddling around, noisily. He picked one of them up, held the child in his lap and said:

"Whoever welcomes a little child, welcomes me - and the one who sent me."

Greatness measured by service. Intimacy with God a product of opening your arms to the weakest, the least influential, the powerless? It's a peculiar way to look at things.

It is a direct and dramatic challenge to the world's assumption that greatness is a product of power and strength and size.

And that is an assumption which is deeply embedded in our culture.

Greatness - equals power - equals winning - equals beating someone. Do you notice that every athletic victory, regardless of how modest, elicits the now familiar response: "we're number one" - even if it's a battle for last place? How curious that little leaguers conclude that winning a game means - we are now pre-eminent, if not omnipotent. How unfortunate that there have to be rules in professional sports prohibiting what was once unthinkable, namely taunting and humiliating your defeated opponent.

What is it about us? "It seems that we need an enemy to define ourselves," observes Professor Betsy Flowers of the University of Texas [see James Autry, Love and Profit, p. 103]. It may be that what we did to Iraq was geo-politically necessary, and if it had to be done, it was good to do it quickly, but it is a very curious kind of patriotism that attaches greatness - and feeling good about ourselves again - to finding an enemy to beat.

It is a pathology, I would submit, this commitment to greatness through obliteration of one's enemies, and it infects the culture from top to bottom. We must be number one.

James Autry, recently retired CEO of the Meredith Corporation, has written a book that is receiving a lot of attention, under the title Love and Profit. Autry objects to this ideology which finds its way into corporate life and sees business as a battle which demands total commitment to your competitor's demise. In an essay on "Winning Redefined" Autry tells about reflecting on a sales meeting he attended and how one of his managers tried to motivate her peers. "I'm into winning" she said, "so let's get out there and kick a little ___."

Autry has written a very different book. "Management is a matter of love," (13) he proposes and advises that if you don't care about people you should get out of management before it is too late... "Save yourself a heart attack and save many people a lot of daily grief." (17) Autry thinks the Vice President for Human Resources should be called Vice President for Caring. (77) And just when you think this is simply a sentimental version of your garden variety how-to-do-it management primer, Autry goes in deep and it sounds as if good management really is serving the very people you are trying to manage. "Listen" he advises. "Pay attention." Care for people by knowing when a son receives a scholarship or a parent dies.

Jesus said greatness is measured not by the standards the world always uses, but by service. And then in case they thought that was a harmless abstraction, he brought a child into their midst. Now his Hebraic culture valued children but the larger culture did not. In Graeco-Roman culture children were expendable, ignored, not nurtured, often simply abandoned. One of the first Christian service projects was the adoption of abandoned children in the Roman Empire. So when he brings this child in as an example of service he is saying something about the kind of service he means - namely service... listening to... paying attention to... taking seriously the needs of those who have no power, no authority, no public worth, no political clout.

And I found myself thinking that maybe that hasn't changed much: that within the sub-culture of privilege,- the one which you and I inhabit - children are valued, but they really aren't

valued at all by the culture at large when it expresses its priorities politically and economically. To be a minority and poor and a child is to be in a lot of trouble in our nation at this point in our history. And I found myself musing that author Alex Kotlowitz has done a very Christ-like thing in writing There Are No Children Here, by bringing into our midst two children actually, Lafeyette and Pharoah Rivers who, with their mother, LaJoe, lived in the Henry Horner Homes in Chicago: and who - if we look at them for very long, by reading the book Kotlowitz has written - will stun us, too, into an embarrassed and shameful silence:

"If I grow up, I'd like to be a bus driver" Lafeyette puts it: "if," not "when" I grow up, because he has made the adjustment to a sub-culture in which children don't make it to adulthood - some not at all, and very few to an adulthood that includes anything so grandiose and splendid as driving a bus. LaJoe gave the book its title by responding to Kotlowitz's suggestion about studying her children and home and then writing about it. "But you know there are no children here. They've seen too much to be children." And like many CHA mothers began to pay $80 a month for burial insurance for her two boys and four year old triplets because by the summer of that year, 1987, 57 children had been killed in Chicago - five in Horner, including two who died from smoke inhalation when firefighters had to climb 14 stories because the elevators were broken (p. 17).

Let Alex Kotlowitz bring the children into our midst:

> "Lafeyette had promised his mother he wouldn't let anything happen to Pharoah. But for a brief moment, he thought he had lost him.
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> "Three days after Lafeyette's birthday, gunfire once again filled the air. It was two-thirty in the afternoon; school had just let out. As Lafeyette and his mother hustled the triplets onto the floor of the apartment's narrow hallway, a drill they now followed almost instinctually, they caught glimpses through the windows of young gunmen waving their pistols about. One youth toted a submachine gun.
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> "The dispute had started when two rival drug gangs fired at each other from one high-rise to another.
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> "From his first-floor apartment, Lafeyette, who had left his fifth-grade class early that day, watched hopefully for Pharoah as the children poured out of the Henry Suder Elementary School, just a block away. Panicking, many of the youngsters ran directly toward the gunfire. Lafeyette

and his mother screamed at the children to turn back. But they kept coming, clamoring for the shelter of their homes.

"Lafeyette finally spotted his brother, first running, then walking, taking cover behind trees and fences. But then he lost sight of him. 'Mama, lemme go get him. Lemme go,' Lafeyette begged. He was afraid that Pharoah would run straight through the gunfire. Pharoah would later say he had learned to look both ways and that's why he'd started walking. 'My mama told me when you hear the shooting, first to walk because you don't know where the bullets are coming,' he explained. LaJoe refused Lafeyette's request to let him go after his brother. She couldn't even go herself. The guns kept crackling.

"Meanwhile, the police who at first thought they were the targets of the shooting, had taken cover in their cars and in the building's breezeway. Passersby lay motionless on the ground, protected by parked vehicles and a snow-cone vending stand. Then, as suddenly as it began, the battle ended." [p. 17, 18]

Jesus said - Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all, and then he brought a child in and said - this is what I mean: You will follow me you will be faithful to the God in whose name I speak as you serve and receive and love and celebrate the weak and helpless and vulnerable. I am enormously grateful to the young women and men of our armed services, and I loved the parades, but I hope and pray for a day when national greatness will be measured by how well we are doing with Pharoah and Lafayette... and that we will have a parade on Michigan Avenue when the elevators work at Cabrini-Green.

It's a challenge to his church which, with embarrassing consistency, measures greatness just like the world does...pursuing conversions as if they were sales contracts, presenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ as if it were a crusade over Jihad, winning by overcoming theologically, ecclesiastically, numerically - the other people. A great church means a big, strong church, with a big budget... There is an incident in an Albert Camus novel [L'Etranger] in which "a priest, trying to convince an unbeliever, pulls open a drawer, takes from it a silver crucifix, and brandishes it to reinforce his argument. Jesus, comments the teller of the story, did not call us to wave the cross, he called us to carry it." [see John V. Taylor, The Go-Between God, [p. 139]

So maybe churches decline not so much when they are under official persecution, as when they forget why they exist. Perhaps there is simply no earthly reason for a church to exist if it does not live out the greatness defined by Jesus.

Jesus challenged the fundamental assumption of most of the religions of the world. Religion ordinarily suggests that the highest and holiest to which mortals can aspire is communion/fellowship with God. But Jesus taught that when you serve others in his name, you are in the presence of God; that the religious life is not sequestered from the world, but busy in the world, with its sleeves rolled up, holding in its arms those no one else pays any attention to.

Now - a cautionary note. Every minister has discovered that in the congregation every Sunday are people who have allowed themselves to be used and exploited and somehow thought the Christian faith wanted them to submit to that. We never used to speak about, so most of us didn't know it existed; but in every congregation are women who have been abused - or who are being abused and who rationalize it using passages like this one, and the ones that urge denial of self, and suffering service of others as a religious good. In The Dance of Anger, Harriet Lerner calls it "de-selfing." "It happens when one person, often a wife, does more giving and going along, and does not have a sense of clarity about her decisions and control over her choices." [Weavings, May/June, 1991, p. 20]

That's not it. Abuse of any kind is not what Jesus meant at all. In fact, it would have made him very angry. Service is not service unless it is freely given, in love, without any coercion at all.

And a cautionary note about compromising greatness and blaming it on religion. Jesus was not endorsing mediocrity. In fact, he didn't criticize his disciples' desire to be great. He simply redefined it in terms of service and sacrifice. When you think about it that is what greatness requires, whether it's performing heart surgery, playing the pipe organ or putting a ball through a hoop, greatness means selfless dedication and lots of sacrifice.

So - what does he want? What is his purpose in this peculiar approach to life? Jesus wants his followers to learn about living for others. Jesus wants his followers to discover and define themselves in terms of service to people in need. Jesus calls would-be-disciples to an adventure which begins by leaving behind all the assumptions, even about religion. Jesus - and this is stunning - wants us to forget about even our own salvation so he can save our souls.

And that's the deepest mystery of all: that in forgetting about ourselves we find ourselves;

that in living for others, life begins to be meaningful;

that in serving the children, we are served;

that in dying, there is life.

Have you ever heard of anything more incredible than a great God who loves and who will suffer in love for the creation, for each of the creatures, for each of us? A Lord who reaches out in humble love to everyone - everyone who is unloved, everyone who is weak or in some way powerless, everyone who is in any way vulnerable? An amazing Lord, whose love is so broad and big that it includes us all in its strong embrace?

"Who can believe in the Christians?" Annie Dillard asks. "They are smug and busy, just like us... They are not innocent, they are not shepherds and fishermen in rustic period costumes, they are men and women just like us, in polyester (and wool). Who could believe salvation is for these rogues? That God is for these rogues?..."

Unless, of course...

Unless Christ's washing the disciples feet, his service for them, means what it could, possibly, mean: that it is all right to be human. That God knows that we are human... and we are God's people anyway, and the sheep of God's pasture."

It is the mystery of our faith. It is the challenge - the imperative - and the promise -

Whoever would be great ... must be the servant of all.

Amen.